

## The ALSJ Young Scholar Award for 2020

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# Translating Trauma: Melancholic Love and Ugly Feelings in *Beloved*

translate, v. 1) to convert or render (a word, a work, an author, a language, etc.) into another language. 3) to convert or adapt (an idea, an artwork, etc.) from one form, condition, system, or context *into* another. 10) to take or convey (a living or deceased person, a soul, etc.) to heaven or the afterlife.

— *Oxford English Dictionary*

### Introduction: *Beloved* and Affect

**T**oni Morrison's most renowned novel, *Beloved* (1987)—with its opening sentences reading “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom” (3)—is a text seething with intense feelings. In 1873, the present of the story, the mother Sethe and her daughter Denver are dwelling in 124, a number designating “a house palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut” (6) at the hands of the mother Sethe about eighteen years prior, and the ghostly trace of the murdered baby’s grudge is so acute that 124 has been undergoing chronic poltergeists, “the living activity of the dead” (35), which eventually culminates in the resurrectional advent of the titular character.<sup>1</sup> As the name *Beloved* literally implies, she is an embodiment of Sethe’s fervent love toward her deceased child or, in turn, *Beloved*’s morbid demand to *be loved*; and the two women, as it were, come to fall in mutual melancholic love. From the guilt-ridden mother’s standpoint, her own suffering from the “baby’s venom” is viewed as due punishment that might hopefully perform an expiatory function vis-à-vis her infanticide. Hence, she at once endures and embraces it: “It was as though Sethe didn’t really

want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (297). Further, her adamant fixation upon "the incarnated memory of Sethe's guilt" (Rushdy 578) is not merely a manifestation of her personal sense of guilt but, more broadly, a gesture of not forgetting the institution of slavery, a historical backdrop that brought about the familial tragedy in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Her attitude therefore involves ethics: her melancholy is tantamount to her fidelity to the memory of the historical, collective suffering of the African Americans.<sup>3</sup>

This morbid and ethical attachment between the two fueled by love and fury, however, brings another trouble to the fore: it precludes the living daughter Denver from their psychofamilial relationship as well as from the whole community. Beside Sethe and Beloved's vehemence, Denver's feelings cannot but seem dwarfed, a stark contrast captured in the first few chapters of the story. Having no access to the memory of her mother's past, her elder sister, and slavery above all, Denver is in a sense an "outsider" from the familial and racial history. Hence, Sethe's melancholy is not solely ethical but violent as well; it prioritizes kneeling down before Beloved over caring for the eighteen-year-old Denver: "124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps she [Sethe] was oblivious to the loss of anything at all" (47). Then, the fact should draw our attention that it is Denver who finally helps sever the melancholic bond between Sethe and Beloved toward the end of the novel and thereby salvages the family up from the quagmire. This outsider's intervention, facilitating a "healthy" mourning on the insider's part and therefore ultimately oblivion of history, could also incur violence. Thus we encounter the tension between Sethe's melancholy and Denver's mourning in terms of ethics and violence, which, if the novel itself seems to eventually champion the latter, would provoke the following question: What is the ethical condition of an outsider's involvement in insider's trauma? The query is worth pursuing since it can be directed not only to Denver but also to us all, readers engaging with this historical novel, who are much more distanced from the lived history and memory of slavery than Denver.

To reconsider the import of this more or less marginalized character, I would like to draw on affect theory's now-popular term "ugly feelings," seeking to highlight the problem that strong feelings could violently reject, neglect, and disrespect a subject who is capable of having no more than weak, ugly feelings. Sianne Ngai's eponymous study *Ugly Feelings* (2005) characterizes this as "minor and generally unprestigious feelings" in contrast to "grander passions like anger and

fear” or “potentially ennobling or morally beatific states like sympathy, melancholia, and shame.” Above all, its most salient component is that ugly feelings are “amoral, and *noncathartic*, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (6). Among the scholarship attributed to the so-called “affective turn,” a turn that aims for “the reversal of hierarchies that subordinate emotion to reason” (Cvetkovich 13), *Ugly Feelings* stands out in that it further aims for the reversal of hierarchies that subordinate weaker emotions to stronger ones. The contrastive formulation Ngai offers would stimulate the reader of *Beloved* not simply into applying the two types of affects to each character, which is more than facile, but into examining the active interaction between the two. True, we witness the dyspeptic accumulation of Denver’s ugly feelings, which never lead to any catharsis in themselves. However, it is none other than Denver the outsider who gives rise to, who *is able to* give rise to, albeit indirectly, the very “catharsis” or “therapeutic or purifying release” of the “grander passions” of Sethe the insider. Given the “melancholic turn” in recent African American studies<sup>4</sup>—a discursive trend engaged in un-pathologizing Freudian melancholy—the un-melancholic, weak, and “ugly” Denver would demand a renewed interest as a liminal figure who literally un-pathologizes melancholia (to this “turn” I shall return in the final section).

Since Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony* (1992), trauma theory has long taken as its crucial critical core the (in)accessibility of other people’s trauma.<sup>5</sup> This concept of trauma, occupying a similar theoretical position as the thing-in-itself or the sublime (Kant), the Real (Lacan), the blind spot (De Man), etc., all ethically charged, might be subsumed under Dominick LaCapra’s general denomination of “negative transcendence” (190).<sup>6</sup> To pick just one conspicuously typical example from the recent Morrison scholarship upon which I intend to build my argument, Sheldon George’s 2012 essay, “Approaching the Thing of Slavery: A Lacanian Analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” which aptly dubs *Beloved* “Thing-of-a-sister” (125), eloquently testifies to the eagerness with which Morrisonians are still discussing the ethicality of accessing the sanctity of trauma. One of the theoretical contributions the present study hopes to provide is the *ethicalization* of affect theory by linking it to trauma studies. To put our principal question in slightly more concrete terms: What kind of ethical role can an “ugly” subject perform *in face of* intensely traumatized others? In answering this interrogation, I will attempt to reinterpret the magical finale wherein the exorcised

Beloved “erupts into her separate parts” (323) by dint of local women’s litany. My focal point will be not *how* as often asked but *why* the black community helps Sethe. This essay concludes that Denver plays a mediating role in *converting* strong feelings into ugly feelings, thereby facilitating Sethe’s recuperation as well as guiding outsiders, not only the community but also herself, to share, or—to employ the much-discussed ambiguous phrasal verb from the novel—to “pass on,” responsibility. Put otherwise, Denver is an ethical translator of trauma; this is practicable solely by those who are positioned on the threshold between the inside and the outside, which is, in this particular case, none other than Denver.

### Transgenerational Transmittance of Trauma

First, let me briefly sketch out Denver’s predicament. While her subject position with regard to the history of slavery ought to be strictly distinguished from that of insiders, she is nonetheless *not* uninvolved in it as a consequence of its transmission via her mother. This mechanism finds its literary expression in one of the most oft-quoted passages of the novel, wherein Sethe tells Denver that there are unforgettable things in the world, which the mother terms “rememory.” Here, Sethe’s explanation almost sounds as if she were a post-2000 trauma/PTSD theoretician. According to her, this is a kind of memory that is “floating around *out there outside my head*” and even other people can “bump into a rememory that *belongs to somebody else*” (43; emphasis added). Although it seems difficult to pinpoint a single definition of the idiosyncratic term, these citations at minimum signal its paradoxical topos: a rememory belongs not merely to an individual who has undergone the incident in person but at the same time to a public space, therefore open to “you who never was there” (43),<sup>7</sup> to wit, outsiders. So, that Denver is an outsider is not necessarily my judgement; the text thematizes her outsidership vis-à-vis slavery. It is through this liminality that rememory could find its venue to be communicated to others, which is dangerous since, as Sethe warns Denver, “it will happen again; it will be there for you” so “you can’t never go there” (44). Whether it be slavery in general or any specific incident, the innocent Denver must be protected and remain immune from it. Assuming it to be possible—“Nothing bad can happen to her” (50)—is an indiscretion of this mother.

Despite Sethe’s admonition against and silence upon “rememory,” it is inevitably transmitted to her daughter. Indeed, as Gabriel Schwab argues in *Haunting*

*Legacies*, traumatic memories will be inherited *because of* the silence thereupon. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's seminal concept of postmemory, an idea Hirsch develops partially through reading *Beloved* by viewing it from Denver's perspective—"How is it remembered by those who did not live it or know it in their own bodies? This is the story of Denver in the novel" (Hirsch 11)—Schwab maintains that the second generation children "need to patch a history together they have never lived by using whatever props they can find—photographs and stories or letters but also, I would add, silences, grief, rage, despair, or sudden unexplainable shifts in moods" (14). Among these nonlinguistic paths of trauma's transgenerational transmittance, what might interest the reader of *Beloved* is the unconscious movement of a traumatized body. Immediately after the rememory passage during which Sethe seemingly falls in a so-called "altered state of consciousness,"<sup>8</sup> the narrator reveals that Denver has learned to read her mother's body like a text:

*Denver knew* that her mother was through with it—for now anyway. The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame—signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go. (45; emphasis added)

To quote Schwab again, "traumatized bodies reveal their own optical unconscious. It is this unconscious that second-generation children absorb" (14). Not only does Denver occupy a reader-in-the-text position with regard to traumatized insiders; she is literally a symptomatic reader of the somatic text that has illegible lacunae in it. Of particular import here is that *Denver knows* there is a "beyond" and yet never pushes it since *she knows* that she is not supposed to. The second-generation children inevitably become keenly aware not only of the conspicuous "presence" of "negative transcendence," but also the untouchability thereof. The mother's obdurate tabooing of the matter has, it seems, successfully constituted an ethic in Denver's mind.

This daughterly care, however, puts Denver under heavy stress since she vaguely but rightly apprehends that the unspeakable memory is the very reason for her family's isolation within the community. When she was seven, for instance, Denver was asked about "murder" by a boy named Nelson Lord, which plants into her psyche a tormenting seed:

The patience of her mother and grandmother in [the ghost's] presence made her indifferent to it. Then it began to irritate her, wear her out with its mischief. . . . Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn't know what to do with. Even when she did muster the courage to ask Nelson Lord's question, she could not hear Sethe's answer, nor Baby Suggs' words, nor anything at all thereafter. (121)

She needs to understand what it is but her superego checks the presumptuousness; she is compelled to endure the situation but not allowed to ask and know why she cannot lead a "normal" life: "I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to" (242). This dilemma is the very plight of this second-generation child. While Sethe asserts that "No moving. No leaving. It's all right the way it is" (17), Denver is obviously not all right.

The above discussion might sound unfair toward Sethe who is unquestionably another victim of the institution of slavery, although I have no intention to, ultimately, criticize her. If trauma is in its nature "not available to consciousness" even for directly traumatized subjects (Caruth 4), what Sethe calls rememory is not so much an "unforgettable" wound that she is reluctant to recount but rather an "unrememberable" one, thus she has no way to confide it to Denver. In this sense, Sethe herself is also an "outsider" of her own infanticide, by the definition of "trauma" per se. This paradoxical positionality, one somewhat analogous to that of rememory, seems concurrent with her dysfunctional affect. While Sethe's emotion is intense enough to resurrect her deceased child ("my love was tough and she back now" [236]), her problem at the same time is her incapacity to feel anything at all. Since the infanticide, Sethe has felt almost nothing for eighteen years—remember: the period is coextensive with Denver's wretchedness—an apathy symbolized by her bruised and callus back that does not "feel the hurt her back ought to" (21). As the psychiatrist Judith Herman notes, "The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion" (34), trauma creates extremely antithetical effects in one's psyche; it causes the excess *and* the lack of feeling. This contradictory state of mind—the coexistence of intense feelings and psychic numbness—is what traumatized people suffer from.

Nonetheless, it is none other than the text itself that enunciates this criticism

toward Sethe by narrating, to quote again, “perhaps she was oblivious to the loss of anything at all” (47), a phrase now we cannot read without noticing its implication toward Denver’s “loss.” When Sethe declares her belief that “nothing bad can happen to her” (50), she is barely aware of her younger daughter’s psychological pain, perhaps because of the aforementioned extremity; for Sethe, something that counts as “bad” is nothing less than death, so “It’s all right” insofar as Denver is alive. Having undergone the super-intense experience, she seems to have grown insensitive to weak, ugly feelings (which was, to repeat, brought about by slavery). Stated from a different point of view, no pretext can erase the fact that Denver is also suffering in her own manner, or that Morrison chose to explicitly register Denver’s distress in the novel. This is a problem of comparison; here slavery is viewed as “an ultimate ground for historical reference” (Flanagan 389) in relation to which all the sufferings shall be weighed, calculated, and evaluated. Within this paradigm, with its zero-degree being the transcendental trauma, the ignoble Denver surely would be ignorable. But then *Oh well, it can’t be helped* is Morrison’s conclusion? *Beloved* at least does not answer affirmatively. Neither do I.

### Ugly Feelings

Before Denver determines to intervene in her mother’s melancholy as an outsider, what initiates the whole story is an intrusion of another outsider proper: Paul D, an old friend of Sethe from Sweet Home, Kentucky, a then slave state. Although he is a good man, I chose the word “intrusion” since his reaction toward the poltergeist allegedly caused by the baby’s ghost inevitably involves violence: he grabs a table “by two legs” and breaks furniture and windows, “wrecking everything” (22). As a precursor performing outsider’s violence, he ought to be contrasted with Denver. The most obvious difference, as is already palpable, is his physical strength; that he is simply *able* to snap the deadlock by means of muscle is his problem. Predictably, his worldview is deeply gendered and, at its most masculine, turns violent. For instance, when he finds himself unable to resist *Beloved*’s magical force to expel him from 124, he blatantly reacts, “he wanted to knock her down” and tries in vain to cheer himself up, musing, “If he trembled like Lot’s wife and felt some womanish need to see the nature of the sin behind him; feel a sympathy, perhaps, for the cursing cursed . . . he too would be lost” (137). Or elsewhere, objecting to accommodating *Beloved*, he is surprised at his

own “ungenerous” remark popping out from his mouth and the “irritability in his voice” (67); Beloved in this manner arouses ugly feelings in Paul D. He, however, is too proud of himself—“*that man, who had walked from Georgia to Delaware*” (148)—to accept “weakness” (149), a central concern of the present study.

The way in which he initiates the whole story is quite simple: he mobilizes the two (or three) women’s affect. On arrival, he wittingly and unwittingly leads Sethe back to a normal psychological condition with his innate gift to make people feel: “Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because of him, in his presence, they could” (20). Not unlike Denver, this outsider can be violent *and* therapeutic; he rearranges 124’s affective economy, inaugurating the first move of the Suggs’s recuperative trajectory. His ambiguity in terms of violence is aptly articulated in Sethe’s language: “There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made. . . . He was responsible for that. *Emotions sped to the surface in his company*” (47–48; italics added). In comparison with Denver again, his advantage is that he shares several traumatic histories with Sethe (with the crucial exception of the infanticide). What is more, he is starkly contrasted with Sethe in that he has recovered from these hellish memories, a contrast succinctly enunciated in his caveat to Sethe and her rejoinder: “Your love is too thick”; “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all” (193–94). He is a character who has more or less succeeded in working through trauma, with his strategy to attenuate his feelings: “love just a little bit” since strong love is “risky” (54), which is symbolized by a tobacco tin in his pocket with its “lid rusted shut”—“There’s a way to put it there and there’s a way to take it out,” says he (86, 84). Being familiar with both affective shores, he has a potential to mediate between Sethe and Denver.

Emotions that “speed to the surface” are ugly ones for Denver: she is, to enumerate a few, “shy,” “miserabl[e],” “irritable” (14, 23, 74), and, most conspicuous and recurrent, “lonely.” From the daughter’s viewpoint, Sethe and Paul D constitute “a twosome” (15), which makes her feel “jealous of her mother’s past, and her exclusion from that past increases her loneliness and bitterness” (Krumholz 404), resulting in “her impoverished emotional and social life” (Furman 263). By way of “acting ugly” (*Beloved* 55) in front of the guest, she awkwardly attempts to express her “ugliness” stemming from her outsidership. Thus Paul D, first by his



intimacy to Sethe, second by “[getting] rid of the only other company she [Denver] had” (23), i.e., the ghost of Beloved, intensifies Denver’s misery, which Sethe scarcely appreciates. Noteworthy here is the contrast between the two women’s emotion animated by Paul D; nowhere is this revealed more clearly than in the vocabulary whereby they describe the “baby’s venom.” First, Paul D asks, “What kind of *evil* you got in here?” which Sethe corrects, “It’s not evil, just *sad*” (10; emphasis added). For that matter, Denver also has something to say:

“We have ghost in here,” she said, and it worked. They were not a twosome anymore. . . .

“So I hear,” he said. “But sad, your mama said. Not evil.”

“No sir,” said Denver, “not evil. But not sad either.”

“What then?”

“Rebuked. *Lonely and rebuked.*”

“Is that right?” Paul D turned to Sethe.

“I don’t know about *lonely*,” said Denver’s mother. “*Mad*, maybe, but I don’t see how it could be *lonely* spending every minute with us like it does.” (15–16; emphasis added)

This conversation testifies to the fact that each woman is viewing the ghost through her own interpretational frame. With Ngai’s wordings in mind, let us pay attention to the affective adjectives. From Sethe’s viewpoint, it is “sad” (sympathy or even empathy between Sethe and Beloved) and, if not, “mad” (more intense); for Denver, it is “lonely and rebuked.” Here, if the past participle “rebuked” sounds a little odd, we had better paraphrase it not as “reprimanded” but as “checked,” “repulsed,” or “repressed” (*OED*), which unmistakably speaks to Denver’s own situation.<sup>9</sup> They are talking about themselves through the interpretive dispute over the ghost. Hence, for Sethe, it must be far from “lonely” (she negates it twice).

Although Paul D for a brief moment succeeds in persuading Sethe and Denver into beginning a new life, with him playing a pseudo-father, the advent of the murdered child—another “emotion” that “speeds to the surface”—disarranges the affective puzzle pieces. First, it is Denver who earnestly welcomes and willingly takes care of Beloved, a new, unexpected companion for her. If ugly feelings have no “therapeutic or purifying release” as Ngai maintains, Beloved for a while plays the role of the recipient of Denver’s discontents that theretofore had no outlet.

Second, as we already know, Beloved expels Paul D and subsequently, as a result of monopolizing the mother, Denver. The latter process emaciates Sethe, which entices us to consult Freud's classic essay, "Mourning and Melancholia." As Freud opines, the libido—a term that must be understood not as sexual desire but as affective energy in general invested in loved ones—of a melancholic person is "not displaced on to another object" but "withdrawn into the ego," thus "establish[ing] an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (249). As a consequence, it finally becomes "difficult for Denver to tell who was who" (*Beloved* 283). Thus a new "twosome" is formed, now much more united with its reciprocal investment of melancholic love. When there is no room for Denver in 124, "She would have to . . . leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (286).

### Translating Trauma

As Denver has long confined herself within doors for her lifetime against her own will, it is as if a dangerous adventure for her to get out of the fortress of 124; she must "be ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch" (286). At her own risk Denver, through "a little conversation" (293) with her neighbors, gradually begins to restore (her family's) connections to outer world. At this point of the novel, readers are already informed that Sethe, eighteen years previously, was spotted by her former possessor to be taken back as a slave again, including all of her children, which galvanizes her maternal instinct to "out-hurt the hurter" (276). Hence, the novel's conclusion—the exorcism of "the devil-child" (308) by dint of local women's litany—seems to be generous forgiveness and altruistic aid granted by them, as has largely been argued by critics.<sup>10</sup> However, during the preparation for the exorcism, the narrator recounts: "When they caught up with each other, all thirty, and arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves," meaning their own past, and continues, "there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs' yard, not feeling the *envy* that surfaced the next day" (304; emphasis added). This adumbrative narration brings us back to an earlier part of the novel for a more detailed account; the following is a portrayal of the days between Sethe's successful escape and her infanticide:

124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? *Why is*

*she and hers always the center of things?* . . . Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave . . . It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. . . . The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air. (161–62; emphasis added)

Not only does Denver's unanticipated presence remind the locals of the abject family "but themselves" as well. It returns the repressed history: the whole incident concerning the infanticide was facilitated by none other than the black community ("It wasn't whitefolks . . . so it must be colored ones" [163]). They betrayed and told on her, putting an end to Sethe's "twenty-eight happy days" (204), a fact that the *Beloved* criticism has unfairly downplayed although the "scandal" is revealed in the very chapter preceding the one depicting the infanticide lest the connection should elude reader's attention (perhaps after second reading). I am not claiming it to be a newfound discovery; rather, my contention is that the tendential unheedfulness would be concomitant with the excessive veneration of Sethe/Beloved and, in turn, the critical negligence toward Denver. For the community, to help Sethe is to help themselves, too. Sethe's redemption is also theirs.

At this point of our discussion, one must have noticed the above passage steeped in affective language. Although the narrator employs vocabulary that signals intensity such as "angry" and "furious," it would be safe to assume that the most proper word that designates their emotion is, as most palpably captured in the italicized question, *jealousy*. Thus we encounter another salient instance of ugly feelings, collective this time. Throughout the novel, the narrator showcases such words as "disgust," "meanness," or "envy" (5, 185, 304) in paraphrasing the *ressentiment* harbored by the tacit community. In spite of, or rather exactly because of, their cognizance of the hardships of this "ex-slave," the Suggs's "reckless generosity" is regarded as, to borrow a phrase from a critic, a "crime of displaying wealth" (Washington 179). To our surprise, Morrison even has Stamp Paid—a character whose name ironically stands for the exact opposite of the novel's theme—speculate, "Maybe they just wanted to know if Baby really was special, blessed in some way they were not" (185). Despite the women's helpfulness, an overemphasis on their benevolence would surely obliterate their historical role as perpetrator, the very origin of this whole tragedy and its denouement.

Now we are ready to address the interaction between strong and ugly feelings. To recall Ngai's qualification of ugly feelings as "*noncathartic*," it is more than tempting to describe the "show" wherein Sethe's infanticide was precipitated and performed as, from outsiders' viewpoint, definitely cathartic. Put differently, it is as if each individual's portion of ugly feelings converged on just one person, Sethe, which ended up in the spectacular sublimation; Sethe's trauma is a sum of outsider's ugly feelings, so to speak. What is more, as the last sentence from the block quote, "The scent of their disapproval lay heavy in the air," suggests, this affect cannot be attributed to any specific individual; it is a mood or atmosphere which functions, in the present context, as a convenient pretext so as for them to evade personal responsibility. In this way, the novel demonstrates the mechanism of converting ugly feelings into an intense *one*, which culminates in infanticide and then resurrection. When ostensibly noncathartic ugly feelings are directed toward and accumulated upon one person, they can be rendered cathartic in a violent way—and, crucially, *vice versa*. If Beloved is an aggregate of their ugly feelings, now each of them, by disassembling it, respectively retrieves a part of it. It is in this context that we can understand the passage, that Beloved "erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away" (323). The exorcism of Beloved is a *desublimation* of trauma, through which process "A hill of black people" (309) inherit their own share, a small piece of trauma. This is a belated redistribution of historical responsibility among outsiders.

If one looks for a more fitting term to better express this interchangeability of trauma, *translatability* stands out, especially so when taking into account its rich lexical connotations. As featured in the epigraph of the present essay, these three entries from *OED* index three distinct yet overlapping "translations" of trauma demonstrated in *Beloved*. To quote again its abridged version, 1) to render a language into another; 2) to convert an idea from one form into another; 3) to convey a living or deceased person to heaven. Further amending, 1) linguistic translation, 2) conceptual translation, and 3) spiritual translation. First, this is a novel that has its characters put traumatic experiences into language. As Naomi Mandel holds in her *Against the Unspeakable*, the characters in *Beloved* are not granted "a retreat into a privileged space of silence" but "must speak the unspeakable" (204). Contra "negative transcendence," they gradually and partially undertake to render taboos into words—more concretely, to think about it, talk about it,

and remember it. When Denver realizes that “Nobody was going to help her unless she told it—told all of it” (298), her resolution bespeaks this requisite articulation, which eventually enables us who do not possess traumatic language to gain linguistic access, albeit limited, to their interiority. Second, as I have just attempted to explain, *Beloved* is a text that illustrates the mechanism of converting trauma as a concept into another form. Trauma as sacred nucleus is broken into “ugly” affects sharable by outsiders; from negative transcendence into positive historicity. When the narrator has Sethe muse, seemingly through free indirect speech, that “Years ago—when 124 was alive—she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with” (112), the text appears to imply that her trauma could be, should be *shared*. Third, simply, exorcism is also expressed as translation; *Beloved* as an embodiment of trauma is literally translated.

Certainly, none of all these “translations” was accomplishable without Denver’s resolution to take risks. As the sole medium who has been forced to straddle the threshold between inside and outside, strength and ugliness, melancholy and mourning, the past and the present, Kentucky and Ohio, source language and target language, Sethe and *Beloved*, Sethe/*Beloved* and the community—she inaugurates, facilitates, and witnesses the desublimation of trauma.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, it would be impossible for Denver by herself to enjoy a *catharsis* of emotion, but she could be its *catalysis*; she is a converter and redistributor of trauma as historical responsibility. If “Denver’s position,” as one critic notes, “parallels the reader’s in her historic relation to her mother’s past,” and if therefore “Denver is Morrison’s precursor” (Krumholz, 405), I would not hesitate to call Denver the protagonist of this novel, who translates and thereby “passes on” trauma’s historicity not only to outsiders within this fiction including herself but to all the readers as well. *Beloved* is a text that accomplishes “the task of the translator,” which is, as Walter Benjamin stated, “to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in [her] recreation of that work” (80). Trembling at the precarious “edge of the porch” that could bridge fictionality and actuality, Denver and Morrison together succeed in translating trauma.

### Coda

As I announced in the Introduction, I would like to briefly touch on cultural studies by way of conclusion. Obviously, I have put racial elements in parentheses throughout the discussion, despite the past two decade’s upsurge of critical

concern in black studies toward affect, especially melancholy. Indeed, since the melancholic turn, around 2000, the inseparable association seems to have been formed among trauma theory, affect theory, and critical race and ethnic studies, with melancholy being the common denominator. “Drawing on psychoanalytic categories of mourning and melancholy,” as Ann Cvetkovich recapitulates in the first entry, “affect,” from *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, “critical race theory . . . ha[s] produced new theories of melancholy or unfinished mourning as productive rather than pathological” (15). The melancholic turn designates this new politico-theoretical endeavor in reconceptualizing a “nonpathologized melancholy” as a “black affect” against Freud’s classic dyad (Crawford 801, 804). Several differences notwithstanding, my overall interest is in line with such scholarship; I have built my argument on their insights—*Beloved* is one of the cornerstone texts within this project—and my concern was not and is not to “criticize” the new discourse.

Instead, what I intend to do here is just to reaffirm a possible contribution of my more or less theory-oriented, that is, color-blind argument from another angle by juxtaposing it to critical race studies. All I think I am capable of is no more than a “juxtaposition” since I, a Japanese student joining the ongoing academic conversation around African American literature, am a racial *outsider* from the very topic.<sup>12</sup> While being aware that it is not a very common gesture to foreground one’s own racial identity here, I nevertheless cannot help but feel obligated to do so in concluding the present essay whose primal question has been *what can outsiders do?* Unbracketing racial identity now brings my subject position to the fore in contrast to Denver as well as Morrison, both of whom are African Americans. Whereas their outsidersness stems from temporal, generational distance, mine is also racial, geographical, and national, at the very least. With this disparity in mind, to restate the present study’s fundamental query modifying it with cultural studies’ vocabulary, it might sound like this: How can a racial other intervene in people with historically disempowered identities while eschewing cultural appropriation? Do we outsiders even have the *right* to address these issues? If we do, on what grounds are we able to constitute racial outsider’s ethics? Are racial outsiders also able to fulfill the task of the translator, and how would it differ from that of Denver or Morrison?

My answer is threefold. First, we need to be sensitive as to when, where, how, and to what extent outsider’s support, cooperation, or intervention is called for.

Second, even at an appropriate time and place, we must perforce register our outsidership, that is, our indelible potentialities for violence.<sup>13</sup> Third, unlike Denver, there remains a crucial determinant that I need to take into account: *Who we are*. In this case, if I, a racial outsider, venture to get involved in one way or another—by writing an academic essay on it, for instance—it would be my responsibility to try to offer a perspective that might be relatively hard for racial insiders to acquire. Melancholic-turn scholars for the most part seem to be asking *what can we ourselves do?* from African American’s viewpoint, with their own perfect validity, necessity, and urgency. But this is why I cast light on an African American daughter’s, an insider’s, outsidership: my argument might have been brazen enough to push aside racial factors on the one hand, but it has also enabled us, hopefully, to zero in on Denver’s neglected outsidership as a bridge not only to African American descendants but beyond to racial outsiders as well, on the other. When successful, the inquiries undertaken by insiders and outsiders need not necessarily be contradictory against, but rather be complementary with each other. Besides, though we ought to seek to find, and perhaps even invent, an ethical manner of engagement on each particular occasion confronting each specific instance, I hope an outsider’s capacity to intercede as a “translator” will be added to its inventory, with its task being “to liberate the language imprisoned in a work,” while at the same time being keenly aware of the potential violence involved in the act of translation and therefore, in some cases, be ready to stop before its limit. Now, what brings me to a halt is the closing sentence of *Beloved*, a crystallization of outsider’s violence, ethics, and untranslatability—“This is not a story to pass on” (324).

### Notes

1 Only being called “crawling-already? girl,” the murdered daughter’s real name is never mentioned throughout the narrative. Toward the end of the book, Stamp Paid suggests to Paul D that the girl might be the missing one who had been detained by “a whiteman” (277), thus hinting that *Beloved* might be a perfect stranger. See also House, 117–22. That said, this possibility does not erase the fact that the novel is for the most part written on the assumption that the girl is none other than the resurrection of Sethe’s eldest daughter.

2 Wyatt maintains, “*Beloved* also has a collective identity: she represents a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the

Middle Passage, the 'Sixty Million and more' on the novel's epigraph" (474). Also, it is well-known in the Morrison criticism that the number of the epigraph implies that of the Holocaust victims. Among others, see Koolish.

3 See Žižek, 142.

4 For a historical account of the "turn," see Crawford's review essay. In terms of the *Beloved* criticism, studies by such as Jesser, Mandel, Best, Sheldon, Singleton, and Levy-Hussen, many of which I will draw on in the present paper, engage in this critical vogue.

5 The famous formulation by Claude Lanzmann, the director of the famed Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985), a film that is featured in *Testimony*, is also notable: To "understand" the Holocaust is "obscene." See Lanzmann with its introduction by Felman.

6 Ngai's selection of the adjective "ugly" should be understood with reference to the Kantian formulation of the beautiful and the sublime; "ugly" is an antonym of both. See also Chapter 6 from *Ugly Feelings*, "Stuplimity."

7 Regarding the "rememory" passage, Michaels argues that *Beloved* is "not only a historical but a historicist novel." He continues, "It is historical in that it's about the historical past; it's historicist in that . . . it re-describes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience" (137).

8 See Herman (33–50) and Van Der Kolk & Van Der Hart.

9 Concerning the "obsolete" usage of "rebuked," see also Mobley, 73.

10 Among many others, see Jesser, Rushdy, and Washington. Ella, a female character who ruminates at length upon the issue, especially tempts us into overlooking community's faults. See *Beloved*, 301–02.

11 Coonradt's thorough examination of Amy Denver holds that Amy's "healing, loving nature permeates Denver who in turn becomes the link to society" (183).

12 The politics of cross-racial identification is the primal concern of Rothberg's *The Implicated Subjects*. For the significance of cross-racial solidarity in general, see Lowe. More specific, Prashad addresses Afro-Asia connections.

13 See Furuï and Trezise, who respectively problematize outsider's potential violence in terms of affect and secondary witnesses (including scholars). I have also addressed the same issue in my previously published Japanese article on Morrison. See Abe, 202–03.



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